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# ABOUT ISSUE IV

As often happens when curating a selection of poetry and prose, a theme emerges from the work contained in the following pages, selected by three editors scattered throughout the state of Florida. Uncommon, however, was the natural event that occurred during the making of this issue that alerted us to the same urgent messages contained in these poems and stories—is violence a necessary part of (human) nature? how do we escape, work with or against the contraints of such violence? how de we exert control non-violently (if posssible)? how do we deal with the violence of nature's phenomena?

We hope you will find, as we have, that the poems contained in this issue are wrestling with these questions. As we (and others) pick up the pieces, the work presented here provides a space removed from the debris and destruction we are facing that allows us the chance for critical reflection so necessary during these turbulent (weather and otherwise) times in the country we call the United States, and in the world at large.

The Editors Obra/Artifact, Journal of the MFA of the Americas



In 2016, **Gina Tyquiengco** created paper cranes for each of the victims of the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL.

## IMAGINAÇÕES

## BAPTISM ANGELICA ESQUIVEL

I heard him through the wall, the steady sound of his knife against the cutting board as he chopped carrots and cabbage for caldo. There was a quiet splash when he tossed them into the boiling broth whose heat reached me in bed, two rooms away. Finally feeling warm underneath my three thick layers of quilts, I began to sweat.

I looked at the piles of flimsy paperbacks that surrounded my bed, scanning their titles with squinted eyes. The *Sibley Field Guide*. *Anzaldua*. *Ficciones*. The names struck me as both foreign and familiar, like seeing a stranger in a dream, and I was no longer sure which of the books I had already read. I reached over and grabbed a yellowing one from on top of the nearest stack. *Space Cadet*. On the cover was a rounded rocketship set against a blue block-colored sky. Orange flames flared.

I could see it in my head. Not the ship, but him. There was a rapid ticking noise before something like a sigh. He turned the knob on the stove and fire leapt up beneath the black comal. The walls began to shake, then. He kneaded pallid tortilla dough as though it were a drum. The pitchless rhythm shook the floor and rattled the tea kettle on the counter. When I closed my eyes the rattling grew louder and louder, moving closer until I could feel it inside my chest, drawing me back.

I was a child, resting my head on the soft stomach of an old woman. She wore a tattered red scarf and a jacket that was buttoned all the way to the neck. She smelled of rosewater. We sat on a couch next to a bustling kitchen. The women's Spanish chatter and loud laughter sounded like a chorus.

I closed my eyes and my attention shifted to the old woman, the tiny spaces between the weave of her scarf, the erratic beating of her heart. It was thumping quickly and loudly, discernable even over the others' conversation. But when I looked up at her face, she was staring serenely into the distance. I wrapped my thin arms in her red scarf and fell asleep.

*Space Cadet* slid to the floor. A faint clinking came through the walls as he ladled soup into a big bowl before placing it on a tray alongside wedges of lemon, salt and corn tortillas smeared with butter. I leaned toward the wall, listening to the splash of caldo against the sides of the bowl as he wobbled down the hall, the weight of the ocean in his arms.

He nudged the bedroom door open with his foot and I did something that I didn't often do: I looked at him. He was older than me by at least a decade, though both of us looked the same age with our wrinkled skin like tissue paper and long gray hair. But, unlike me, he was full of movement and life. He crinkled his bright eyes at me while gently setting the tray across my lap and I briefly wondered if he was some celestial being who had simply taken on the guise of an old man in worn robes. I said nothing as he turned and left the room, his footsteps silent.

The air around me immediately became dense with the aroma of cilantro and garlic. I inhaled the steam, savoring the sweat and condensation that covered my skin. The silver spoon shined from atop a white paper napkin and I slowly took it between my fingers as though I had never eaten before. My untrained hand shook as I lowered the spoon into the caldo.

Pools of fat shimmered like fish scales on the surface and tiny bits of chicken spilled into the spoon. I scooped soft carrots and potato and lifted the spoon to my face. A few drops of broth fell onto my blankets, darkening the fabric. I shivered and sipped the remainder from the spoon.

I thought of the first person who had prepared this meal for me, the old woman with the red scarf. She frequented my dreams, pulling me toward her with her scarf wound around my neck and her spices lined up on the counter. I asked my mother about her, when I was still young but no longer a child. My mother didn't remember the old woman, and even implied that perhaps I had invented her. She was wrong, of course, I wasn't imaginative enough to construct such intricate memories. The woman's fingers softly brushing my hair to the side, me playfully yanking on the coarse silver braid that ran down her back, making her wince. She was too full to just be a fragmented fictional stitching of others I once knew. Like just-kneaded masa, she was warm, textured and real.

I reached for one of the corn tortillas that jutted out of the caldo. It tasted the same now as it did then and for a moment I felt exactly the same, too: full of youth and endless energy. But, like always, the burst of unreasonable hope fled as quickly as it arrived. My sweat and the caldo's steam wafted away, taking with them all my remaining prayers for this life. I was finished; I had only just begun my meal. My hand shook as I lowered the spoon to the bowl, suddenly defeated. Tears pricked my eyes and the spoon fell from my hands, sinking into the broth. I had the urge to throw the covers off but couldn't do so without spilling the soup on myself as it sat heavily on my lap. It never occurred to me to call for him. I began to cry quietly.

I always had the physical sensation that I was about to die; it resided in my gut, just beneath my belly button. It drove me to a constant state of panic, certain that each moment was going to be my last. I sighed, and as I looked into the glistening caldo I realized that what I had always needed was the thing of which I was most afraid. Death was all that could release me from this fear. Still, I couldn't stop myself from weeping, warm streams of salty tears fell to my bed. I cried because I was uncertain what would come next. I cried because I had wanted to go in my sleep, unconsciously. Most of all, though, I cried out of habit. Some days I longed for sorrow and other days it sought me out like a true love, undeniable.

It felt good, the tears leaving my body and spilling all around me. I sobbed until a small puddle surrounded my bed, facing me with its soft, reflective surface. For a moment, it was as still as glass, and in it I saw myself. My hair was stringy with sweat. I was red-faced and lacking grace until the very end. I looked into my bloodshot eyes until a tear rippled the surface of the puddle, blurring my image as the downpour thickened once more.

The puddle of tears grew into a babbling brook. It rose until it was an ocean, claiming my books and records and cigarette butts. The heavy, still full bowl fell off my lap, sinking to the floor. The caldo dispersed into the water before drifting away in the tide.

Sputtering and spitting like a baby, my weeping grew louder and the door shook in its hinges. I gasped for air, for the spilled caldo, for the silver braid, as my limbs tangled in my blankets. The tears slowly crept up the walls and I flailed in this sea of my own making. My head stayed above the surface until I was pressed against the ceiling's slippery tiles. They would become soggy with moisture and crumble apart and away from the roof, disintegrating.

I took a big breath of air before going under. Yellow light came in through the windows and illuminated the tears, casting rippling shadows on the walls. The shadows grew larger and more saturated. They overtook the yellow light, seeming to draw it back in their grasp, and plunged me into pure darkness.

Submerged in warmth, I tried to reach for the wall. The windows were gone and I could no longer see or feel anything besides obscurity. I opened my mouth to yell, but no sound came. And then, cutting through the quiet, came a familiarity. I had heard it before, the steady drumming that gradually grew until it enveloped me entirely.



#### KEY DEER MARK POWELL

It was no bigger than a dog, lithe and spotted and there on her porch when she came out at first light to find its neck bitten so deeply it clung to the body by no more than the tea-colored weave of its pelt. A key deer. It lay across the concrete stoop like an offering, untouched but for its torn throat. She stood there with her coffee and then went inside to make sure her son was still asleep. When she saw that he was, she called the Fish and Wildlife number printed on the magnet attached to the refrigerator.

After that, she went back to watch the boy, never approaching him, never entering into the warm hum of his space because it felt so tenuous. It felt as if she got too close he might disappear. The bungalow had a single bedroom and she had given it to him. If she needed sleep, she could lie on the couch in the front room. But she didn't need sleep. She was watchful. You make your life around the little things, the actions and habits, and most of all you make your life around paying attention. If you manage to make a life at all.

She believed this.

She believed that anyone who said otherwise simply didn't yet know, that their real life waited tucked beneath the furred skin of falseness.

These were the sort of things she told herself, and if they sounded heavy-handed—and she knew they did—she reminded herself she had spent years doing nothing but watching, squinting at herself as if she were a bright light, a thing not quite meant to be seen.

Now she watched the delicate tracery of her son's eyelids, the tan skin, the soft slide of his philtrum. Her life had been revealed in him, in the intensity of his goodwill the day he held a wounded mourning dove, or the smell of sunscreen on his skin. SPF 50 WATERPROOF SPORT. It was suggested you reapply every ninety minutes, but at night she smelled it on him even after he showered, its creamy glide never quite disappearing.

She watched him turn in his sleep.

They played chess in the evenings while the thunderstorms broke, and if he was bored, or growing restless, he was also too polite to say.

But give him time, she thought. He'll want out. He'll want away from you.

But not yet. He was eight, but seemed younger, as if he was only now nearing an awareness of the greater world. But maybe not. Maybe it was simply his kindness. He was gentler than most, more thoughtful. Alone in this bungalow with its mold and tidal funk and the metal lattice beneath the outdoor shower—the piped water warm as soup—alone here, she had a hold on him. She told him stories so that he wouldn't realize how tightly. The ride of Paul Revere that was maybe seventy percent true. A story about Osceola in the Everglades that was completely made up but about these things—the true versus the false—who could really say? Sometimes she read up, did what she might generously call research. Took the old laptop and tried to catch the wifi off the Largo Courts Motor Inn two hundred meters away through the dense mangroves and hammock of pine and oak. She mostly couldn't, and was left with that certain aloneness that isn't exactly loneliness, at least not yet, but like old milk threatened to turn without warning.

Perhaps it had already had.

Just the same, this was her life.

Shopping at the Tom Thumb up near the state park. Plastic bins of blueberries, oatmeal, avocados—things they couldn't afford but things she refused for the boy to live without. Milk for

bones and hair and teeth. Boneless skinless chicken breasts for protein.

Shopping, she never thought about money. But she thought about it other times. She and the boy were volunteering at the Bird Sanctuary where they wouldn't pay her, couldn't pay her, but she wouldn't leave it. There was the possibility of a job at the Citgo or the Dollar General—nine, maybe ten bucks an hour—but one day she decided to simply let the money run out and then reassess the situation.

When she heard the truck out on the shell drive she walked onto the porch.

The key deer was still there.

It was a relief. This soft childlike thing with its lashed eyes and white-tufted ears and savaged throat. But she didn't feel any sympathy, not really. All she wanted was that it be gone. All she wanted was that it her son not see it, and that she not have to touch it. Touching would make it real. Touching made everything real.

There was talk of a panther. It wasn't unheard of. That was what the Fish and Wildlife officer had to say, standing by the loquat tree in his tan shirt on the crushed shell drive of the stucco efficiency she was renting for an impossible 175 a week. They come south from the Glades down the Overseas Highway, down along the shoulder, sometimes right out in the road if they got desperate enough. Drivers hit em. Thirty-two in just the last year.

She wanted to know why and he shrugged. Habitat fragmentation. Hotels. Water diverted for agriculture. They come down the highway and kill the deer, kill pets.

The deer are protected, aren't they?

They are, he said. But so are the panthers.

There were still Christmas lights up, red and green bulbs strung through the trellis and along a wire that ran like a clothesline to the edge of the mangroves. Christmas lights but not hers. It was late February and she and her son had arrived two weeks prior and were still trying to sound out the rhythm of life here, groceries in Marathon, up to Largo for any decent meal that didn't involve fish. But they never went to Largo. They never went anywhere except to the Bird Sanctuary where she volunteered six days a week.

Just you here, ma'am?

My son and I, yes.

How old is your son?

She had never come off the porch, never put down her coffee, never let go the neck of her housecoat, not even when the officer wrapped the key deer in a blue tarp and dropped it into the back of his truck, wiped his hands on his pants and walked back over so that she looked down on him there in the yard. He was sweating, one dark smear of blood below his nametag and down the crease of his shirt. Behind her the window unit came on, rattling.

Is that relevant? she asked. His age?

I'm just thinking a lot of boys like to wander out into the hammocks, playing and all. If he was out there at night.

He won't be.

Yes, ma'am. Well, if you hear something.

Of course.

Tracks. Scat. You see the print of a housecat only twice the size.

I'll call.

We have non-lethal traps. Big steel cages.

I have the number on a magnet.

Yes, ma'am. That would be most appreciated. He turned for his truck but paused to look at the house with its low roof and louvered windows and then at her. His nametag read HOUSTON. Is he inside there, your son?

He's sleeping.

So he didn't see it?

He did not.

Yes, ma'am, thank you, he said, and this time he did turn and got into his truck and drove away. She stood on the porch until the truck vanished into the dense green. It took only a moment. When it was gone she filled a pitcher and splashed it over the boards. Then she went inside to smooth the damp pelt of her son's hair. She had considered lying to the officer, but that seemed more dangerous than being honest. No, I'm not alone. I'm here with my son. So now he knew, the officer. But no one else did.

She had come here for him, to be near him, and to be near birds. He loved birds with an intensity she had never seen any child love any other thing. It was beautiful, this love, and she had come to believe it was her duty to preserve it at whatever cost. It felt like the one thing she could give him, this nurturing of purity, and if it meant disappearing from life then disappearing was exactly what she would do. Except it wasn't exactly disappearing.

Who was the man, mamma?

They were headed north on US 1 past the souvenir shops with their T-SHIRTS 3 FOR \$10 and SHARKS TEETH, past the dive shops and the seafood buffets, the gas stations and billboards for eco-tours. The fish camps, a rifle range, the Jewish Community Center.

What man?

The one on the porch.

I thought you were sleeping.

What was that he was carrying?

A deer.

Was it dead?

It was just after nine but already the day was thick with the heat and the feral stink of the incoming tide.

A panther got it.

Did it eat it?

No. It looked like it had only bitten it once.

Where?

It's neck.

I mean where did it kill it?

I don't know. There, I guess. Maybe in the yard.

Sometimes they'll make a kill, he said, and then drag the body away to come back to later. It's called caching.

Where did you learn that?

He said nothing and then finally he said: You think they're dangerous to humans, panthers? She couldn't tell if it was a question or not, but she answered it anyway.

If you get around them, she said, yes, they're dangerous, I would think. But we aren't going to get around them are we?

Mostly it's humans who are dangerous to panthers.

You've been watching your nature shows, your David Attenborough.

Humans are the true apex predators, he said.

They were crossing the bridge over Tavernier Creek and he was staring out at the catamarans and fishing boats anchored there, beyond them the sun gathering itself into a flat disc over the brilliant water. The aliveness, the living world—it was all around her. She had come for that, too.

They don't want to bother us, she said, did you hear me? They won't bother us.

He looked at her then.

I'm not afraid, mamma.

They were eating a lot of pork & beans, a lot of grilled cheese sandwiches, the kind of things that didn't lend themselves to grand abstraction. Not that she minded. It felt like camp, or like some simpler existence that might never have happened to anyone, or maybe happened every day, as if being alive were the simplest of blessings so long as you managed not to forget as much.

He wasn't going to school. He was going with her to the Sanctuary. There were all manner of migratory sea birds, wounded raptors, exotic pets who had outlived their owners or their owner's sense of possession though she knew you could no more own another living thing than you could own the sky. It was a hard lesson and one she had come to through her son. Or maybe one she had not yet come to, but sensed its inevitable approach. She would learn it, bend to it. In many ways she thought—my God, knew—she was a fool. Sometimes she would silently repeat a name—Chris—and then say it aloud just to prove she still could. She always regretted it. She was a fool. But she was not unteachable.

In the meantime, she could imagine their time here as a project, something site-specific, laying the groundwork for whatever life came next.

Even if she knew that was a lie.

Especially if she knew that was a lie.

The Sanctuary lay through a tunneled canopy of gumbo limbo trees, the drive graveled once but gutted with the runoff of last fall's rain. Except for the thick heat it felt almost like being indoors, the dim patterned darkness, the hush of breeze broken only by the calls of birds. But there was always the heat, the heat and the mosquitoes.

She was wearing pants and a long-sleeve Colombia shirt, sun hat, boots. Her son wore the same, all of it a bit oversized and hanging off his lanky frame. They stood in a dapple of shadow by a green Dumpster and she sprayed bug spray on their hands and neck and had him close his eyes and mouth so that she could coat him. 40% DEET, not the organic stuff made with cayenne and good intentions which she'd tried at first. It had seemed almost an attractant. So on their second day she had stopped at the Walgreens by Card Sound Bridge and bought two bottles of what in her previous life she never would have dreamed of touching.

Don't lick your lips, she told him.

I'm not.

Don't talk. Let it dry.

But you're talking to me.

The parrot named Roscoe squawked, or whatever it was parrots did. When it started singing

her son smiled.

Don't smile, she said.

I'm not smiling.

You're laughing.

Because it's funny.

What, the parrot?

The parrot, this, everything.

You're gonna grow a third eye.

He smiled.

You're trying to make me laugh, he said.

Wings. An extra leg.

It's your fault if I start laughing.

They spent the morning working their way down to the water, a thin drainage ditch opening in their wake until finally they reached the mud beach and the rainwater penned beneath the boardwalks began to spill into the gulf and they stood there watching the slough, the brown foam and pockets of mosquito larvae. The sun was high by then, the day steaming, and they sat in the shade of the main building and ate their lunch, peanut butter and jelly for both of them, like they really were two kids away at camp. When they were finished she went inside the building that was in truth no more than a converted block ranch home, and scooped ice from the industrial icemaker into their water bottles.

The icemaker was in what had once been a basement rec room and she could imagine it in all its mid-nineties glory. Clinton and foosball. Nirvana on the radio. How old would she have been them? Barely in high school, making out on the green futon. Or not making out, as the case had been. She'd grown into her looks, grown into boys, only in her twenties. She'd been at Pratt and the boys at Pratt—what were they? Like some other something than she had ever known growing up around Orlando. The girls, too. These non-binary human creations that seemed to already be living the life she was not yet able to articulate. All she knew was that she didn't fit. It was all Moral Majority and vacation bible school at home. Just say no to this, and also no to that. Then she had met Chris.

She drank some of the water and it tasted like the insect repellent shimmering on her face.

When they stepped out of the house the yard had darkened. The canopy here was dense and at mid-day the ground a scatter of light laced the greater shadow. Only in the center of the clearing was there an oval of pure sun. But it was more than that, it was as if evening had arrived hours too soon. A storm was coming. You could feel the first prickle of electricity, the way it came like the sort of promise you could never quite believe. Yet it came.

She didn't see her son and then she did.

He was over by the edge of the clearing, standing perfectly still by the parrot cage. She couldn't see Roscoe either, but then she spotted a splash of green in the bottom of the enclosure. He was silent. She'd never known him to be silent.

She called her son's name.

His back was to her and when he shook his head it was almost imperceptible.

When she called him again he held up one finger and she approached, staring over his shoulder into how many shades of green.

What is it?

He didn't take his eyes from whatever it was he saw.

I don't know, he said.

You heard something.

Roscoe too.

Let's go back.

Hold on.

Then they both heard it, something slinking deeper in the mangroves. The parrot flapped its wings wildly and began what sounded like the squeal of a baby. A feather, so green as to appear chemical, drifted through the wire to the ground. And then Roscoe stopped, and the sound in the forest was gone.

She was sweating now. She was freezing.

My God, she said. That was.

Yeah.

That was the panther.

The house was full of old newspapers. They'd been here when they rented the bungalow weeks ago and she'd had every intention of throwing them out, but somehow couldn't. There was something strange in keeping them, almost perverted, she thought, because she had the feeling that if she kept the papers time wouldn't advance and they could stay here forever. Now and then while he was on the X-Box she had bought him—he could sit there for hours, on his knees like a supplicant, nothing moving but his thumbs—now and then she would take a newspaper at random and sit on the front porch with the box fan on high to keep away the bugs.

It was different papers at first, one from this stack, one from that, but gradually it was the same five papers, then the same three, then the same paper. After that she began to shed the individual pages so that eventually she was left with only page 5D of the Miami Herald. She needed the lives to pass out of their ink and become real in a way they weren't, but more truthfully were. She needed them to be something other than what she read from paper to paper. A wreck on I-95. A treaty signed in Vienna. A bomb in Aleppo. Those wars no one bothered to watch. Rohingya. Or maybe Rohingya wasn't a place. Maybe it was the people dying?

Soon enough she would locate her own life, go online or drive to the main branch of the Monroe Country Library in Key West and find her own name. Newspapers. Microfiche, she thought, because she couldn't bear to read it online with the speculations and theories and reader comments. An explosion at the Irwin Fossil Plant. The coal ash impoundment that washed into the Tennessee River and the men it carried with it. Only then would it become real, the names—Chris' name, but others too—taking on a resonance in much the same way the as the names of old friends, names once intimate but unheard in twenty years. Then someone says it and the room alters slightly. You understand what you are reading is not an event or a happening or something on the wire services, but as lives more or less lost to you.

As most lives are.

That evening they went to watch the murmuration.

They had been going since their arrival, making the trip every second or third night, watching the flock of bronzed cowbirds grow bigger by the day. It wasn't supposed to happen here, something was failing within the birds, their interior mechanics skewed by the changing

climate, their sense of navigation lost. Not only the cowbirds but all birds. Snowy owls drifting south. Magnificent Frigate Birds seen thousands of miles inland. What they were witnessing was confusion.

But it was the loveliest confusion she'd ever seen.

The birds started gathering about a half hour before dusk, circling over a dry bed that flooded at highest tide but otherwise was a field of gray muck, of mangroves and cabbage palms and a single copse of banyan trees into which the birds would eventually drop. The banyan trees themselves were exotic, elephantine drooping things, three or four trees (it was tricky to tell one from another) occupying the better part of an acre. The birds circled until sunset, the holding pattern gradually growing until overhead was a cyclone of dark cloud moving in perfect synchronicity, black one moment, silver the next. The idea was to confuse predators, the falcons that would swoop in to snatch an isolated bird. But here no bird was isolated. There was safety in their anonymity.

The thought had long been that one bird moved and that movement passed through the flock in a split second—it was all reaction, as if they were pulled by steel wires. But high-speed photography had revealed they were moving independently, only at precisely the same moment. It wasn't reaction. It was synchronicity. Which made it something else. It was like watching a miracle. It was like watching God, the unclocking of His mind. Churning and impenetrable but then everything shifted, the black wings silvered, changed, and what was defined as a cloud became individual birds, feathers, eyes. Patches of sky visible when they became a scatter of themselves and then the sky disappearing as they reassembled.

They stood on the bank where the trail was relatively dry. She and her son and maybe a dozen other people, a few with binoculars or cameras on giant tripods, more with their phones held aloft. The breeze was coming off the gulf and her son's hair was riding up off the top of his head and then flattening when the direction changed.

She put one hand on his shoulder.

You okay?

I'm fine.

Not cold?

No, I'm fine, mamma. You okay?

I am. I'm just fine.

The sky bled in a way that did not lend itself to thought. It registered, its changing nature, but not in words. She was lost in the sunset when the murmuration ended, the drop sudden, a great swooshing sound as the birds descended as one and the tops of the banyan trees shook with their arrival. After that the evening was still and quickly gone, the sun behind the horizon, darkness around them.

She put her arm around him as they walked back up to where the car was parked on the shoulder of the road. She had never known such a thing existed. That seemed strange to her now, that she might have lived without such magic.

Not a puma, but a panther.

She read that online sitting out on the bungalow porch with the laptop after her son was asleep. She had a can of beer and a citronella candle. Felis concolor coryi, she read. The cat of one color. She had seen one once, or possibly had seen one, a mountain lion in western North

Carolina. They had tracked it for days, Chris' obsession, tracks and scat, sleeping in a dry wash in his old nylon dome tent. Chris' obsession that had become hers. Now she imagined it was tracking her, or if not tracking her, seeking her, carrying—maybe—a message. Because it was a message she was waiting on.

She walked inside to check on her son.

He was sleeping beneath a sheet, the ceiling fan spinning, the window opened just enough to allow the stolid air to circulate. She resisted the urge to touch him, knowing if she moved toward him too quickly he would disappear. So she approached him slowly, creeping closer, let her hand drift toward his hair. But it only hung there, near him, but never quite on him.

When she walked back onto the porch she smelled the loquats that had fallen from the limbs into the yard and shelled driveway. The fruit was overripe and bursting, mawed open as if by disease, a single black spot out of which would occasionally rise a yellow jacket.

She and her son had been collecting them.

The stem—if that was what you even called it—the stem was thick and often came off with the fruit, peeling the tree branch so that the waxy green of the wood was visible. It gave her pause. They were collecting them to make a pie but seeing that green made her question the damage done. It appeared so vulnerable, like skin revealed beneath a torn nail, and she had to be careful to twist the fruit, to let her thumbnail sink into the stem and cut it cleanly.

She walked barefoot into the dark yard and felt one break wetly beneath the arch of her foot. The smell sweet. The juice warm. She slid her foot backwards so that the crushed fruit streaked the pad of her foot and came to rest between her toes.

She was barefoot. This came to her like a revelation.

The loquat smelled very sweet there in the still-warm night and it lifted her.

There were lights visible through the mangrove. She could hear a woman's voice and then the hum of a radio. She looked back at the bungalow and decided to walk. Her son was asleep and yes, it was stupid, and yes, she was barefoot, but she had sudden need for human company, adult company. It was something she hadn't felt in years, this urgency to be near another. She would just walk over. She could be back in what? In twenty minutes, she thought.

She was off the shell drive and into the loamy mangrove forest when she realized she should have worn shoes. The ground became thorny, everywhere dried palm fronds, cracked limbs, deadfall soft at first touch but beneath that hard and sharp. Still, she went on, the lights assembling, the voices—she heard a man's voice too—louder, intelligible. She came out by the water, farther from the motel than she had thought. A sailboat was tied up and she could see the shapes of the man and the woman sitting on the dock in beach chairs. A radio played Neil Young and she knew them, old hippies, realized she had probably seen them at some point, beaded bearded dreadlocked, or seen people like them since to be an old hippie in the Keys was not a terribly unique thing. She helloed them and they called her up onto the dock.

You came through those mangroves? the man asked. How far?

Not that far. I live in there, a little house in there.

Shit, sister.

The woman packed and sparked a bowl, held it before her as if for inspection and then passed it over.

You need this more than me, she said.

Welcome to the Dreamcatcher, the man said grandly. A place of peace and being in our discordant times.

Oh God, the woman said. I told him.

What? the man said.

I told him not to say things like that.

The man was drinking Natural Light, the wreckage of cans beneath his chair. The woman sat beneath what appeared to be a chenille bedspread, beside her a bottle of Seagram's she tipped into a champagne flute.

You want a beer? the man asked, and she did, she took it, she thanked him.

The stars were bright. She put her head back against the pylon where she sat, closed her eyes, opened them on maybe a shooting star or maybe no more than light streaking beneath the lids. The pipe came back around and it was so much like before. That year in the mountains with Chris, down by the thread of the river, the way the river held the cold, releasing it in gray breaths. The quilts piled when the snow came. Fourteen months in the middle of a life can be a life. Most people never knew that.

They're watching me, she said. They've sent a cat after me.

What's that? the man asked.

A panther actually.

Like what do you mean watching you? the woman asked.

It creeps around the house. I think it wants my son.

This a metaphor or this what? the woman said, but the man nodded and just kept nodding.

I hear ya, he said.

It's bringing me these deer. But the thing is. She sounded dreamy even to herself. The thing is I don't know if it's like an offering or a threat.

I fucking hear ya, sister.

When she stretched out her legs the woman suddenly bent forward, the oval of her face emerging in the wan dock-light.

Honey, she said. Your feet.

Her feet were cut, bleeding. She had felt it but not really. She held her beer against one arch and then the other.

It's all right, she said, and then she started talking about the panther.

It was sometime later that she found herself moving back through the mangroves. There had been some sort of argument, the man and woman wanting to keep her there, for her not to go, just sit still, drink some water. The woman trying to bandage her feet, saying the man would drive her home in the morning. His Grand Wagoneer right there by the dock. But there was her son. They seemed not to understand about her son, seemed not to believe in him, and she had to run, to wrench herself free and go, splashing into the forest only there was no splash. She knew her feet were being torn but it registered more as pressure than pain, the sense that the skin was broken, and kept breaking. She hurried, saw the light of the bungalow and then didn't. Came out of the mangroves into a sea of sawgrass and that wasn't right, wrong direction, moving wrong, slicing—which was also wrong. Cuts on her arms and hands, cuts on her throat.

Finally, she came out on the shell road. The night was cool, almost cold, but she was sweating, panting. She moved down the road and it was there, beneath the safety light of the bungalow, that

she saw the tracks. They were just like the man from Fish and Wildlife had said. The print of a housecat only twice the size. She couldn't tell if they led toward or away from the house, maybe both.

She started running then, as hard as she could, harder still when she saw the front door was open, the screen torn. Then she saw the drag marks, the blood trail that led into the mangroves and she couldn't breathe, sprinting now, the rough passage easy to follow though she didn't have to think about following it or not following. She only ran. A wake of broken limbs and thrashed deadfall.

She started screaming his name, kept running.

There was no feeling below her knees, no feeling anywhere beyond the sense she was moving on these pulpy stalks, screaming, listening. Then the trail came out on the road and moved back toward the house in one bloody loop. She ran up the stairs and found the screen intact, the door shut. Her son was asleep in his bed and standing there at the threshold she began to weep. She wanted to go to him but knew he wouldn't be there if she did. So she stood crying until she was afraid her gasping would wake him and then walked on her heels to the bathroom where she filled the tub and sat, the water going pink and then brown with blood and dirt.

Later, she sat on the lowered toilet seat and cleaned her wounds, tweezing thorns and shells shards. She took three ibuprofens and checked a second time on her son. He was still asleep, and she arranged herself on the couch, propped her feet on a pillow and shut her eyes. The sweat and adrenaline and pot and beer and absolute exhaustion. But he was here, he was safe. She shut her eyes. She shut her eyes.

But when she woke in the morning there was another key deer on the porch.

They had made bird feeders, she and Chris, pine cones smeared with peanut butter and then sprinkled with seed. The birds came, a single red-tail that circled. She had made these that summer along the river in the mountains. The old barns in the bottomland and the new houses on the ridge, giant triangular constructions of timber and glass, second homes, vacation homes, overlooking herds of expensive Charolaise cattle, white muscled things waded into the current. The baby would arrive in the winter, just after the new year, the next year, the one that never came.

She started seeing trucks around town. A pale institutional green with the shield of Fish and Wildlife on the doors. There was a small plane in the sky, always banking, turning, and at the Sanctuary she overhead talk that the panther was radio-collared only the signal was too weak to track. It was killing things, a German Shepherd, stray dogs, had been captured on a highway traffic camera. Meanwhile, they cleaned cages and spread mulch and said nothing about the key deer. She tried to disguise herself, to hide. Took down the Christmas lights, dyed her hair, wore costume jewelry when they went out for groceries. There were new birds in the cages, an osprey tangled in fishing line, a heron with some sort of bacterial infection. Her son loved them. But she decided one day they couldn't go back. People were watching her, acting as if they couldn't see her son.

Her feet ached and one day walking out beneath the cabbage palms looking for owls they found a large metal cage baited with a dead raccoon and meant for her son.

Everyday there were more trucks.

We may have to go soon, she told him.

Where, mamma?

They went back to the watch the murmuration but there were no birds, only the small plane banking and turning, and watching it she felt the radio telemetry registering inside her. It was the smallest of tremors but it was evident, like being struck with a reflex hammer, or on the funny bone. It throbbed, tingled.

We may have to go tonight, she told him.

A helicopter appeared, a thrumming that came and went and then all at once she would spot the little whirling star of a Bell Kiowa tacked against the otherwise empty blue of the sky. She had heard that the panther's radio collar had long since failed to pulse but a particularly sensitive instrument—the type no doubt mounted to the skids—might detect whatever trace signal remained. It could also detect her.

She found another trap.

But this time it was baited not with a dead raccoon but with dead birds, a small slaughter of crows. The kind of thing her son might try to crawl in and save and then they'd have him. They wanted to talk to her at the Sanctuary. Was this a good place for her to be, speaking emotionally? Did she want to talk to someone who was maybe trained to listen?

She did not.

Gather up your things, she told him when they got back to the bungalow.

They drove Highway 1 to Key West. The other option was Miami with its Brickell banks and high tide washing through the storm drains, the water sheeting off a balcony during a mid-day rain. Mojitos and Bugattis double-parked on Lincoln Drive. She had been there once, coming south down I-95 to Miami then on past the Santeria shrines and roadside crosses to Florida City where she'd spent the night at a motorcourt beneath a billboard for airboat rides. She had been there and wasn't going back. Miami, Homestead, Florida City. The cabbage palms and ficus and poincianas. Barred owls beneath the overpass. Now the long bridges over water graying in the dusk, stuck behind pickups pulling ski boats, the flashing of brake lights, but it didn't matter. They were in no hurry. Their motion was south out of the mountains and that was what mattered.

Her son was buckled into the front seat, old enough but too small, his lanky frame arranged beneath the seat belt.

You okay?

I'm fine.

Hungry?

He shrugged. He needed a haircut. The length of shaggy hair a referendum on her parenting, one of the little things to which she had failed to attend. She noticed again his skinniness, elbows and knees and the thin bones of his wrist.

We'll eat next place we see. That all right?

That's fine.

The next place they saw sat on pylons out over the marsh, the parking lot gravel, a neon sign flashing FRESH FISH so that the mangroves pulsed pink. It was empty but for a large tour group that sat in the center speaking their loud German. Cuba. She kept hearing Cuba and guessed they'd been there on some cruise out of Miami, arriving with their leather sandals and Euros.

Their food came out, popcorn shrimp, hushpuppies.

The Germans were singing and past the tide one of the tourist helicopters that flew out of Islamorada skimmed the water.

Are you sleepy? she asked when they were back in the car.

Not really.

Rest and I'll wake you up when we get there.

You promise?

I promise.

It was dark when they reached Key West and she drove the streets of the new town looking for a place they could afford. It was all neighborhood here, a sleepy quiet of bicycles on porches and trashcans and recycling bins rolled beneath streetlights. Chain-link fences. Stucco bungalows with their louvered windows down-drawn like batting eyes. Hammocks and mail boxes shaped like manatees or dolphins. All of it a bit shabby.

She carried him into a motel that backed onto a retaining pond where an egret stood in the bent reeds, took the plastic chair to the concrete pad and sat there barefoot, one, maybe two in the morning. Frogs croaking, mosquitoes. The cuts in her feet had closed but were possibly infected. She had a burnt place on her tongue, a dime-sized oval of dry ground razed by the breading of the fish she had eaten. Her son was in bed. She could see his shape through the sliding glass door and seeing him she wished for a drink, a simple glass of wine. There were times in those years after, those years alone, that she had wished for a drink, but then it had become so foreign, the taste, the feel of the glass her hand.

She went inside and got in bed beside her son, cut the TV on and let it play quietly. Saint Francis had stared at a tree in winter and asked to see God. The tree had erupted into purple blossoms.

In the morning, they dressed and walked across the island to the public library with its concrete fountain and pink façade. It was late morning and already the sun was molten, pure heat and light and nearly overhead in the cloudless blue of the sky. At the cafés, fans misted water over the elderly in their cruise wear, the younger couples smelling of skin-so-soft, phones out on the tables, fingers on screens. A rack of foldable maps ringed with coupons and past them came the servers tattooed and pierced and carrying waffles and espresso and brightly colored juices.

They held hands and walked quickly. There seemed some need for purpose, intentional motion while around them passed bicycles and taxis and pedicabs hauling honeymooners down to Mallory Square. She saw them, but not really. It was that thin awareness they were out there, and that they had put her here. There had been anger and resentment for a while. There'd been rage. But even rage eventually failed.

She looked back at the café as if it might be following her.

You okay?

He nodded, smiled.

His hair was mussed, cow-licked onto end, and it hurt her to see it. At least he had eaten. The woman had been cleaning up what little breakfast the motel provided and seemed annoyed when they walked in just before ten. White bread in a toaster, thimbles of jelly and a butter-like substance made from soybean oil. He'd eaten half a loaf while she drank Nescafé and looked at yesterday's paper. That was why they were here, the papers, the records she could only bare

to examine in person because what good was it to read it online? You couldn't hold it online. It wasn't real. And the one thing she knew was its realness. They were leaving—she had decided this, Cuba, the Bahamas, wherever they could get to—but she had to read it first because only then could she leave it behind.

Fleming Street appeared before them and they made a right.

Here we are, she said, or thought she said, because he didn't seem to hear.

The library was a quiet hum of children half-circled on a rug and men reading magazines in arm-chairs, a bank of computers, shelves of books. She asked at the front desk about the reference section and found it in the back, tucked into wands of dusty sunlight. Newspapers on rods. Walls covered with black-and-white photos and posters on researching genealogy.

She found a few magazines for her son. Highlights which was how old she had no idea. A National Geographic for Kids with a rhino on the cover. There were a few chairs and a couch against the far wall.

Just sit here for me, all right? I won't be long.

He nodded and she smoothed his hair.

You're okay?

I'm fine, mamma.

She went back to the computers and searched her name, searched the dates and locations. She searched EXPLOSION. Searched COAL ASH IMPOUNDMENT AT IRWIN POWER PLANT; SEVEN DEAD. She clicked the links and the articles opened but then she closed them without reading a word and walked back to the reference desk. She wanted the actual papers, needed them, really. Did they have them? Maybe somewhere in storage?

The reference librarian wore a pastel shirt that read MONROE COUNTY.

You can't find them online?

I can. I was just hoping for the actual papers.

The woman said nothing, just came down from the perch of her desk and motioned for her to follow.

The microfiche reader was in a conference room down a narrow hall.

This is probably the last one on the island, the woman said. Or maybe the courthouse has one, I don't know. She clicked the switch and the machine woke with a soft groan. It looked archaic, something on which one might track Ronald Reagan's missiles. A broad, clumsy screen, but hearing it she felt a little tremor of closeness, as if it purred.

You know how to work it?

I think so.

Come find me if you don't.

The microfiche came in glossy flat pages like x-rays or photographs not quite developed. Another ancient comfort, those things that attached you to some previous life. Her mother on the land-line phone. Her father taking she and her friends to the video rental store. Hollywood. Blockbuster.

She had on white gloves because you couldn't touch it. The New York Times. USA Today. The Charlotte Observer and even an article from The Watauga Democrat. And there they were in each article, the same photograph taken that summer. She is pregnant, standing beside Chris, the creek behind them though you can't see it, only the grainy trees that appeared more as gradations

of ink than actual living things. She could smell it again, the clean pine light, the cool air and the way its coolness came off the water when she stood there with her shoes off, pants rolled above her ankles.

Don't be so serious, she'd told him one day because it seemed like the sort of thing one of them should say.

Am I?

Are you?

Okay, he told her, message received.

But she hadn't believed a word of what she was saying. It was she who was too serious after all, too angry, too in love. Listening to Neil Young in the abandoned Airstream Be on my side, I'll be on your side.

She leaned back and blinked, shut her eyes on sun dogs, the swimming parallelograms of the overbright reader. She'd been in the room for better than forty minutes, longer than she'd intended though she'd made her way through barely half of the articles. She was still in the midst of the fruitless search for Chris' body, the endless dragging of the river. She'd gone into labor that day, standing on the muddy bank in the late summer rain, months too soon.

She walked back up the hall to the reference room, straining against herself.

The room remained mostly empty, the reference librarian on her high perch, a man on the couch. Her son was—

Her son was not in the chair where she'd left him though the Highlights sat in its plastic binder. Beside it the National Geographic lay folded over the arm. She looked back toward the hall that led to the bathrooms and a small interior courtyard, picked up the magazine. Peregrine falcons, he was reading about peregrines, particularly their migration. Alaska to South America in some cases. Crossing cities and deserts and waters and finally settling into the scrubby lowlands of Patagonia. She put her finger in the magazine and walked with it toward the bathrooms. Both doors stood open, the lights off inside. She walked to the courtyard, no larger than the bungalow bedroom though crowded elegantly with benches and ferns spilling from concrete planters, a Rose of Sharon, a peace lily. A single nuthatch hopped over the paving stones.

She called his name, but he wasn't there either.

She checked the bathrooms again, flipped the lights on and off, walked back up the hall to the reference room, finger still in the magazine.

The librarian was staring at her computer screen.

The librarian had no idea what she was talking about.

The little boy, she told her. He was sitting right here.

You're the one using the microfiche reader?

Yes, you took me back. And my son, he was—

I didn't see any boy.

He was sitting right here. Those magazines, this—she held up the National Geographic.

He was reading this. Sitting right there.

I never saw him.

He was right there.

Maybe check up front.

She did, breathing quicker now, sweat just beginning to seep into her hair, rising. She felt

herself begin to steam because it occurred to her they could have followed her, tracked her. Hadn't she heard the plane walking that morning, the helicopter the night before while the Germans sang? My God, they had! She hadn't realized it.

She began to call his name, quietly at first and then louder.

Someone shushed her.

Someone said, excuse me, ma'am?

My son, she said, louder still.

If you could just—

My son. He was here.

The librarian was a woman but now she saw another coming toward her, a man in a green sweater with his MONROE COUNTY LIBRARY tag and his look of bearded concern but it was an act.

Ma'am if you could just—

And then by the door, the police officer or maybe the security guard she hadn't seen coming in, a big slovenly man, eyes jaundiced and lazy-lidded but now he was moving too, one hand at his belt to keep his radio from bouncing and she wrenched her arm free because someone had her by the elbow, someone had her and—

She ran. She ran back down the hall through the reference room toward the courtyard. That was where he would go, to the courtyard with the birds. It was enclosed on four sides, there was no way out, he would be there, hiding. She yelled his name, ran, heard the squawk of a radio and rushed into the courtyard out of the cool air conditioning and into the sultry mid-day heat. Slammed the doors behind her. They were flimsy French doors, eight panes to each, but she slammed them anyway, slipped the thin bolt and began to tear through the wall of vegetation.

She heard them at the door behind her, but she kept moving, the patio so much larger, so much thicker than she had realized. She ran through the green, the sunlight receding in the high canopy while all around her stood mangroves and palms, the sharp knees of cypress, and she was calling his name, tearing forward, calling, tearing. She would not stop.

Then she did. Before her were drag marks, a flattened trail, the blood glossed to so dark a sheen it appeared enameled. She knew then that they had him, and perhaps had for his entire life. How long had it been? The sky was smothering down and she realized it was dusk and she'd been running for hours, calling, her feet bleeding, but what mattered was that they had him. She called his name, called his name.

And then he called back.

Her son's voice.

Mamma?

It was far away but then he called again—it sounded like a question, the way he held onto the word—and she knew he was near. She kept calling his name and he kept calling back, thrashing forward while somewhere behind her came the men who would take her, follow her tracks and scat, drive her into their non-lethal cage.

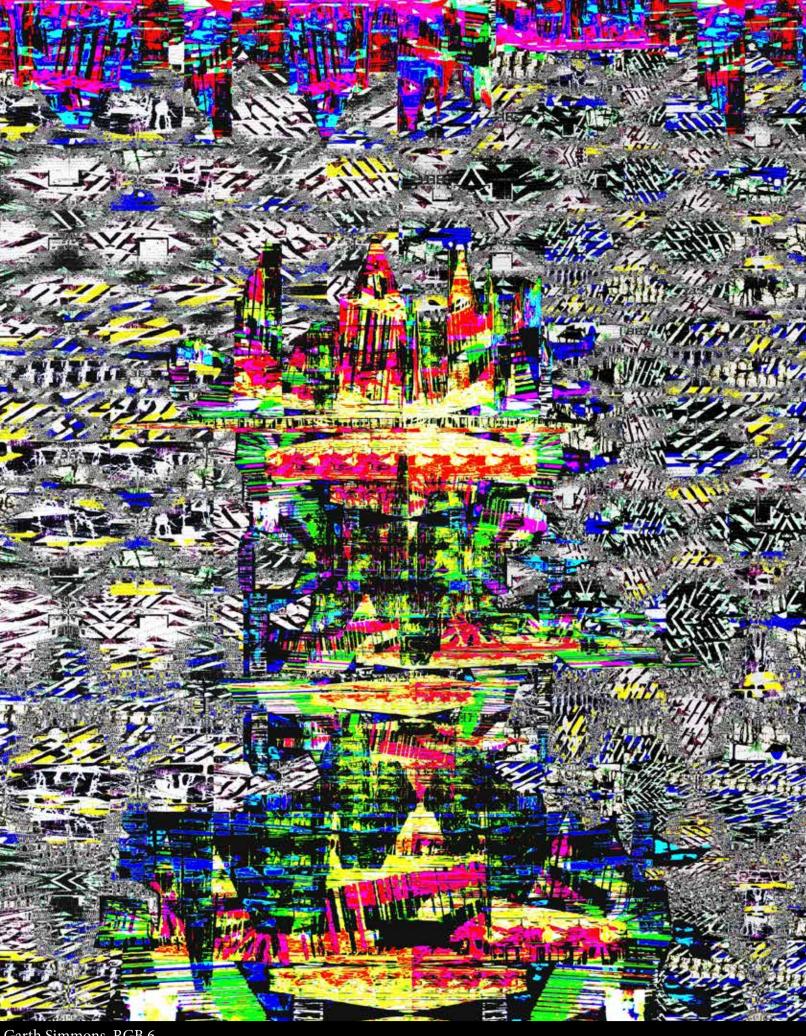
She kept running.

The trail widened.

Remember that day they dragged the river below the power plant? Remember the trail for the ATVs from the Sheriff's department and the rescue squad? It was that wide now, wider, and up

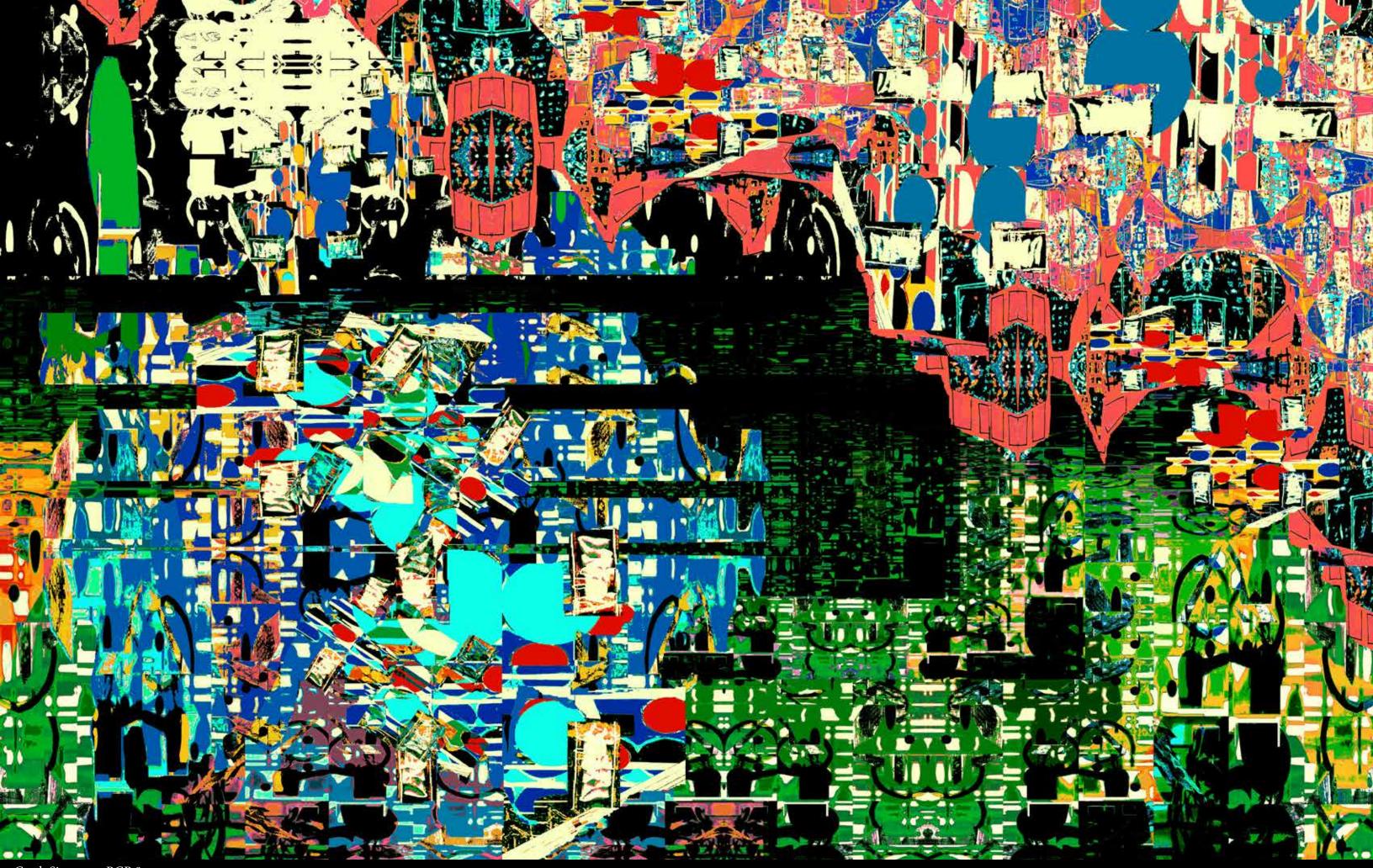
ahead in the clearing she saw the great open maw of a steel trap big enough to hold a panther.

But it was her son that was inside, her son's voice that echoed out, and she crawled in after him, miles deep before she felt the door spring trigger the door behind her but it didn't matter. She crawled forward toward her son but then her son wasn't there. In the back of the trap was the still-warm body of a key deer, its throat torn as cleanly as the two before. But it didn't matter, and she turned her back on it, feeling her tail swish around against the metal fencing that held her.



#### RABBIT KNOWS DANAE BARNES

Rabbit knows the cure for cancer. She tucked it in inside her fur, ran quick down her circle home toward the thick roots of Mother Elm, Mother Oak. With a thousand turns, Rabbit polishes her soft grey coat. Dancing white ears, grey rounding back, Rabbit slides merry in the laughing hollows below the soil. She knows how to cure the wasting sickness, the eating disease that burns the flesh away. Rabbit knows what roots will stop the hungry dying, knows what bracken waters from the tickle-belly root fingers of Father Cherry will soften the sad ache of hair fall, teeth fall, finger-clutching pain. Rabbit wiggles in sunshine to press the secret cure on her grey paws. Rabbit shakes with her big big ears, her big big teeth with glee, strong and sure and merry. Pink nose twitching, Rabbit scents the new shoots pushing up in spring. Rabbit knows of blue flowers growing, sees red flowers falling. She eats bitter shoots, feels the poison cloud cover lift from her blood. Rabbit knows how to dance the sickness of cancer away; flip and flap and a swish! Rabbit can flesh whole again, as she tucks the knowing behind a long fur ear, black at the tip and quivering. Rabbit knows how to chew with big big teeth at the roots of Mother Elm to bring a new body health. Gone could be the sick belly, sad face, aching bones; But she is now far from Mother Oak, far from Father Pine and Mother Elm. Rabbit's fur, stolen from her, rests silently with its secret. On collars, on cotton, tucked inside of the torn and broken skin of Sister Cow, Brother Pig, Rabbit's fur, grey and soft and smelling of blue flowers falling, sits apart, idle and helpless.



# EXCERPT FROM THE LIVING INFINITE: A NOVEL CHANTEL ACEVEDO

1

Su Alteza Isabel II, Reina de España, carried ten relics on her person during her last few weeks of pregnancy. These included the desiccated right arm of John the Baptist, which, wasted and ancient, resembled a piece of driftwood, and a rosary belonging to Saint Francis of Assisi that smelled of flowers at all times. No one could blame her for taking every possible precaution. Out of twelve deliveries, each ferocious and hard-fought, only five of Isabel's children survived.

And the queen was determined that this child would live.

In February of 1864, two days before Saint Valentine's feast day, Isabel delivered a blue, half-asphyxiated child. The jawless skull of that love-feasted saint, bedecked in preserved flowers, stared out at her from its small crystal coffin—a relic sent to the queen from Rome. Upon seeing the infant's skin going from pink to pale lavender, to indigo, Isabel cursed the date, and thought, desperately, that had she held the child in for two more days, just two more, then Saint Valentine might have intervened.

Whisked away by her formidable doctors, the baby was doused with holy water, el agua del socorro, so that her soul might not be trapped in purgatory forever. But events unfolded in unexpected ways. The child recovered her breath, and, soon enough, rested comfortably in her mother's arms.

Outside of the Palacio Real de Madrid, a white flag was hoisted, and fifteen salvos rang out, indicating a girl, an infanta, had been born. The noise infiltrated the room of Isabel's labor. It disrupted the first song Isabel sang to her daughter, a tune that no one recalls, and, thankfully, interrupted, too, her memories of the other babies who had lived only an hour or so after birth, who had turned blue, who had gone still and cold in her arms.

Isabel let out a bark of laughter when the little infanta sneezed, but the sounds converged with shouts of anger and cries of anguish coming from the streets of Madrid—anger because the flag and the salvos had announced a girl, and anguish because there would be no spare son, so ardently hoped for in those dark, frightening days. She was named Eulalia, which meant "well-spoken." No other Spanish royal had shared the appellation, and so it was a name for the present and the future, a name without a past.

The baby was placed on a silk cushion of royal blue, and the cushion was laid on a silver platter. Baby, cushion, platter were paraded before the ambassadors and palace folk waiting in the main hall. Wearing their silks and furs against the chilly air, the men and women of the hall clapped and peeked at the small rosebud that was the baby's genitals and sighed. The baby made no sound, but peered at them all with damp, lively eyes. A man commented how she appeared to be thinking hard about something. Another said she resembled no Bourbon he had ever seen. Another lamented that she was not the son they had hoped for. But the important thing was that she would live. That was certain, and there was relief and happiness at that.

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The milk brother, too, was born in this time of peace. The Carlists, those pretenders to the throne, had gone quiet in the years before he was born, meeting in secret, biding their time. Amalia, his mother, remembered that on the day that peace was declared, the children in her

village were given pots and pans and bells to ring, and that they trooped through Burgos in celebration. The priests had been angered by the display, for many of them had supported Don Carlos, since he had promised the church land and wealth. Though peace was declared, the fighting went on for a few years, and Amalia, who was only nine years old at the time, would lie awake, listening to gunfire in the distance at night, like the cracking of giant bones in the hills.

The milk brother, whose name was Tomás, was born in a small, dusty room in a house in Burgos, attended by the same midwife who had been at all of his mother's deliveries—a woman named Gisela Castillo. She had delivered half of Burgos's women of their babies, mainly because she was talented, but also because everyone thought she was good luck embodied. Her curious eyes, one blue and one brown, were what started the rumor, and Spaniards being the superstitious people they were, Gisela Castillo became a very busy woman. But her luck had not held when it came to Amalia. She'd come to Tomás's birth dressed all in black, ready to grieve another dead Aragón baby.

At once, Amalia shouted at her to leave. "You're bringing bad luck in here, dressed in mourning!" she said before a wave of pain silenced her momentarily. When it passed, she threw her discarded Sunday dress at the midwife—light blue and dotted with white daisies—one she had embroidered herself. A heavy sleeve slapped the midwife across the face. "Put it on," Amalia told her.

"But it will get ruined, Amalia. Be reasonable."

She gritted her teeth. "Put it on."

In the end, the midwife did as she was told, changing into the dress immediately. It draped over her body like a formless sack. Gisela was quite small. She was slim and brown, her skin retaining some of that sun from the island where she'd been born and raised. They were the same age, Gisela and Amalia, and the latter noticed, as the former dressed herself, the way Gisela's tiny belly button resembled a knot in a tree. Amalia hadn't seen her own belly button in months, she thought between spasms of pain. Gisela rolled up the sleeves and got to work, her mouth set in a pucker. Later, Amalia would apologize, and thank Gisela for changing out of her black dress, but in that moment, they could do nothing but glare at one another. Into this volatile air came Tomás, screaming.

"He sounds like a peacock," Gisela said, bundling the baby and giving him to Amalia. "Have you ever heard one? They cry like infants, but twenty times louder. They stroll around certain parts of Havana, like princes."

"You are ridiculous, Gisela," Amalia told her, teasing, the air simmering between them cooled now that the baby had arrived, pink and vociferous and large. Amalia had never seen such a large baby, in fact, nor had Gisela. Even so, they watched over him like a pair of lionesses through the night.

Rubén, the milk brother's father, who never got the chance to hold any of his previous babies while they still lived, cried fat tears when Tomás was first put in his arms. "Ay, mi vida," he crooned at the baby, and kissed the top of his still sticky head again and again. Both Amalia and Rubén had buried, deep in their hearts, their blighted hopes for the children they had lost. Now, they placed them all on Tomás, small as he was, and imagined the paths he would follow, the man he would become.

Outside, no one waited to hear the sex of this child. There were no cannon shots. Rather, the

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road outside was quiet, because it was a Sunday, and because the Aragón neighbors had come to expect only sadness from this particular family.

Two weeks after Tomás was born, Gisela came over, a new dress draped over her arm. She'd made it herself, and she'd embroidered the deep blue eyes of peacock feathers along the hem.

"Ay, Gisela, you didn't have to," Amalia said.

"Your old dress was ruined. And besides, this particular birth is one to celebrate. Look, look at the peacocks. Fit for a queen."

Amalia examined the exquisite sleeves, ran her finger against the silky threads of the embroidery, tested the whalebone in the bodice against her thumb and forefinger. She was all business, all poise until she felt her eyes sting.

"Don't cry," Gisela said. "If you don't like it—"

"I adore it," Amalia said. "Gracias." Then she sobbed and sobbed until Gisela had to take the baby from her. "It's normal, this crying," Gisela said, but Amalia felt as if she'd been suddenly dropped into very deep water and could only beat her legs for so long.

Tomás was Amalia's fifth baby. Gisela had been there through all of them—Emilia, Francisca, Rubén, who looked as if he might survive, then decided that he'd prefer to follow his sisters to the grave, and finally, Alicia. Each time, Gisela had tucked herself behind Amalia like a pillow, cradling her while she cradled her darlings. She'd whispered "Ya, ya, basta," into Amalia's ear when her sobs had left her breathless. Sometimes, Gisela would sing Cuban songs, and the rhythms of her voice seemed to mimic the coming and going of the sea. It was Gisela who would take the babies away at last, her spine curved, her body a hollow of shared grief.

For Amalia, holding Tomás in those early days felt like trying to cradle a porcelain tea set. His tiny ears were teacups of bone china, and his long calves were like delicate handles. His nose was a spout, his cheeks were creamers of the thinnest ceramic. At any moment, Amalia feared she would drop him and he would shatter, as all the others had done.

But Gisela had come by every day, repositioning Amalia's arms, helping her when Tomás kicked so hard that he was impossible to diaper, feeding Amalia malted drinks and cooking up bacalao for dinner, and holding Tomás when Amalia could no longer bear his weight.

"Big boy, the biggest," Gisela would say to him, nose to nose. He would try to focus on her strange eyes, then he would turn his head and squall.

Amalia knew that Tomás's birth and survival would keep Rubén close by forever. She would observe him with their son, how her husband would lower his face toward the baby and touch noses with him, and she would think, "I have won him now." She had felt him growing distant with each birth, each death. He would take on more work, and that work made him more tired at night, so that he would skip the dinners she made and eat only bread, too exhausted even for conversation. In bed, he would roll over onto his side, away from her. Amalia would rub his arm, slide her hand down to his stomach, lower still, and he would not stir. "Buenas noches," he would whisper and become very still until she removed her hand. That Tomás was even conceived was a wonder to her, and Amalia could not remember what the night had been like, whether she had wept afterwards, as she sometimes did, or if he kissed her mouth.

Now, his son alive and thriving, life thrummed in Rubén again. He smiled often, and snuck up behind Amalia to kiss her ear loudly, and she would smack him playfully and complain that her ear was now ringing with the sound of it. Amalia prayed that Rubén would not change again, that

God would allow him to remember the happiness of their life in that moment when the winds changed again, as they would, inevitably.

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#### EZZAI

## DISPLACED AUDREY WICK

The particle board toy box disintegrated between the vinyl-gloved fingers that pinched its corner. Its matter survived, but its memories washed downriver with the flood.

Daylight brought sights that shouldn't be seen.

Photographs strewn like confetti.

Sewage left by the current's wake.

A dead cow displaced into a residential living room.

Whole homes missing.

The taste of devastation was palpable, the stench leaching into the skin of anyone who dared to come close.

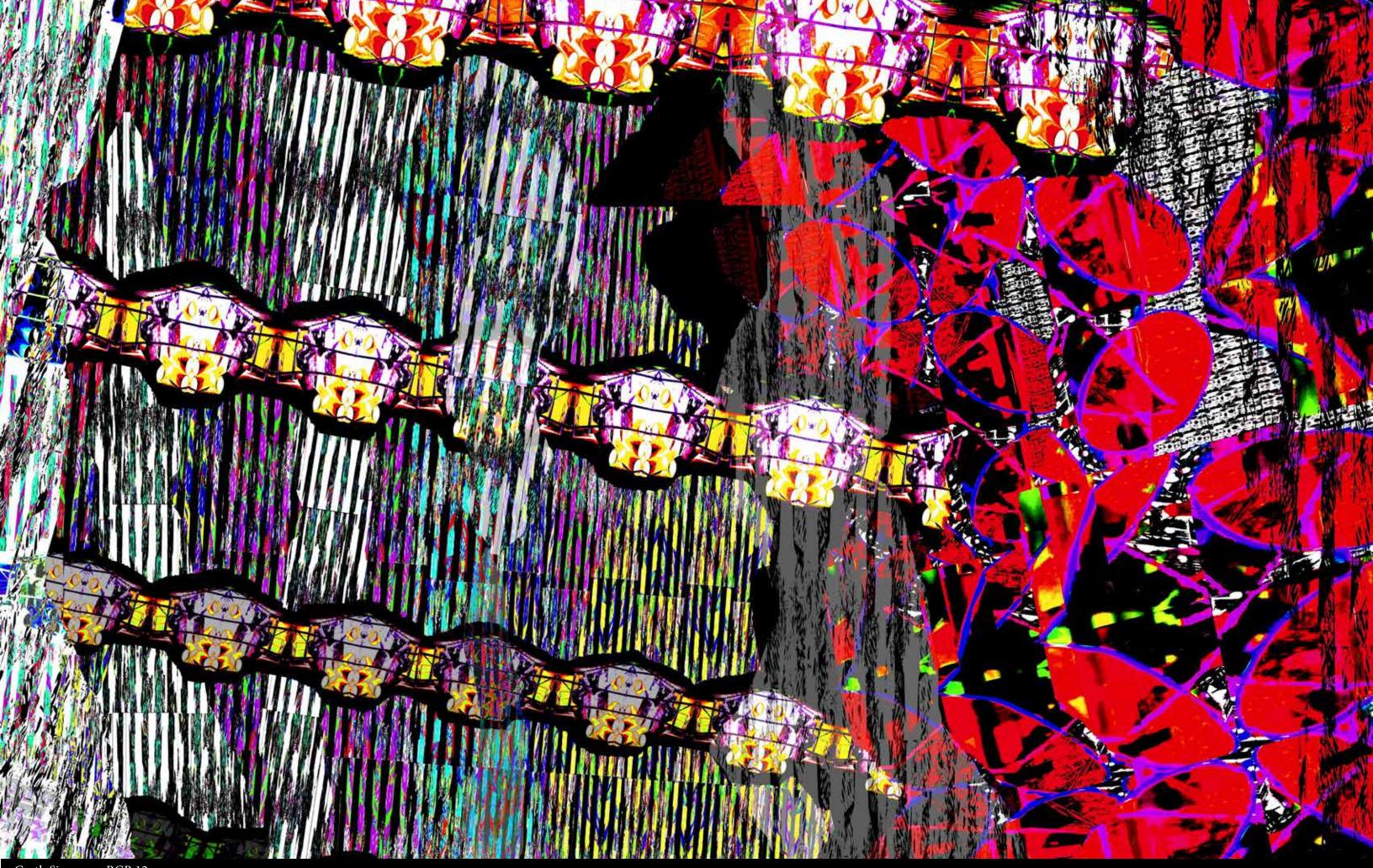
Yet volunteers did.

No words seemed appropriate. Perhaps that's why most worked in silence as they combed through rubble. What is the greater disaster: to lose completely or to be left with the task of cleaning a home's worth of damage after a flood?

Those who held an answer kept their mouths shut. They worked.

Atop the flood line, a single family photo hung untouched above a mantel. No moisture dotted the picture, and no crack fractured the glass. A couple who smiled through a long-ago shutter click now looked across the chaos they could in no way have foreseen.

Lifting the portrait from its nail, a volunteer carried it with the reverence of a golden chalice to the homeowners, who sat hunched in defeat. Taking it in his hands, the husband could barely hold the weight of love contained in the gift. His wife raised her head only to collapse again as she wept her own river of tears.



## HALF OF YOU IS ALWAYS DREAMING NATE MAXSON



POESÍA

#### here where the body

here where the body hollowed out its bed and its hands

voracious plants still grow this transparence turning purple

unspoken languages cling like vines to the body

the eyelids rise the eyes learn to open

colors and shapes green and red fish swim past

through a patch of light
in the murky depths of night white pebbles

these minutes

I'm here I stand up I signal you my body in the current

you name it it drifts aimlessly

#### ce lieu où le corps

ce lieu où le corps a creusé son lit et les mains plantes voraces

poussent encore cette transparence violacée

les langues non parlées qui s'accrochent comme les herbes à la chair

les paupières se lèvent les yeux apprennent à s'ouvrir

les couleurs et les formes les poissons rouge et vert s'enfilent

sur un bout de lumière au fond vaseux de la nuit galets blancs

ces minutes

j'y suis je me mets debout je vous fais signe mon corps dans le courant

vous le nommez il flotte à la dérive

#### exotics

your exotic bird mouth says hello

```
sound
after sound
I caress the vowels
who wants to see me as a little stream flowing out of the dark
leaping over the grass
watering the flowerbeds of absence?
touch the flesh the wind knows nothing about it
walk on the tip of these words a fire starts
the world trembles
bitter pleasure decked out in sequins and feathers
a man glides in my sleep opens my chest
with an axe
we see the sky and the stars
                                 the night wobbles
on my lips
I climb time I defend myself
with a pale
smile
```

I swallow

#### exotiques

ta bouche en exotique oiseau me dit bonjour j'avale après son je caresse les voyelles qui veut me voir petit ruisseau sortir du noir bondir sur l'herbe arroser les parterres de l'absence? toucher la chairle vent n'en sait rien marcher sur la pointe de ces mots le feu s'allume le monde frémit plaisir amer aux paillettes et aux plumes un homme se glisse dans mon sommeil à coups de hache ouvre ma poitrine on voit le ciel et les étoiles la nuit chancelle sur me lèvres je monte le temps je me défends avec un pâle

45

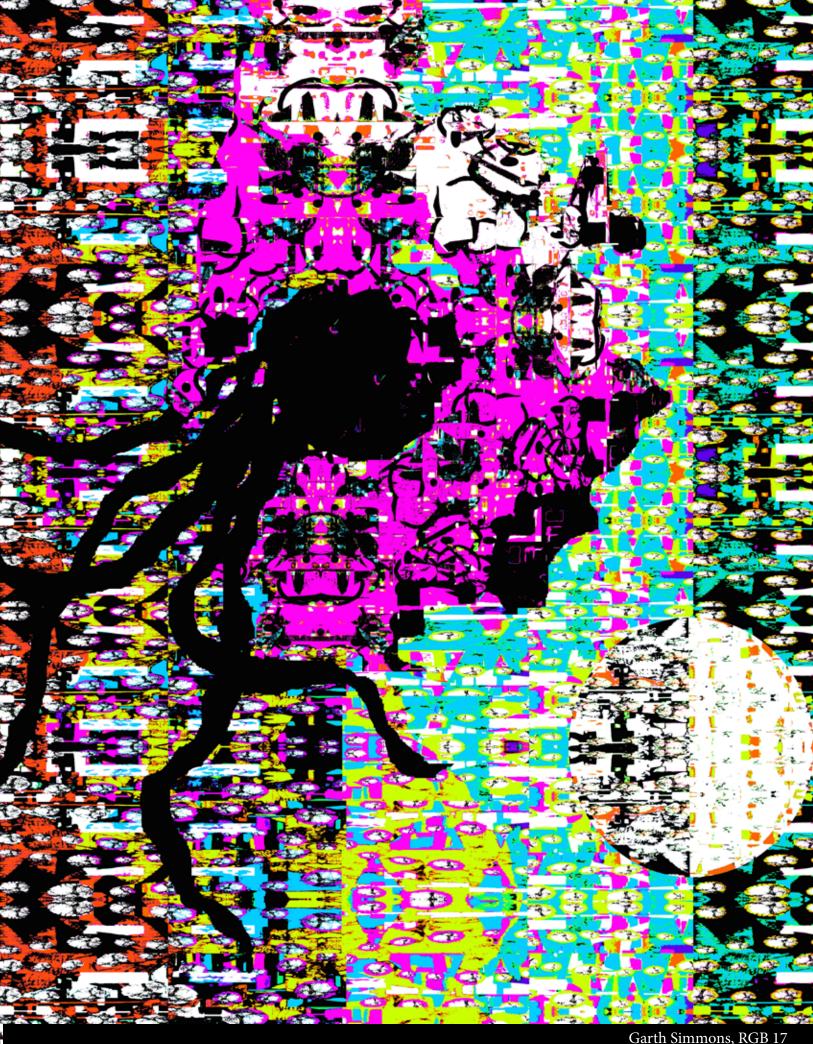
sourire





# TEHOM-RABBA (THE SPACE BETWEEN THE NOTES) JOSHUA LIPSON

I revisit the project in instants between the universal mind moving and in the clefts between the rock lush quark, luminous granule, lather repeat: collisions in blank mass every angle jeweled moonshot I lose my place: no matter — no one to hear it —axes in violent bloom — no way to untangle the thought from creation



## CATHEDRAL J.D. SCOTT

And I walk with pink grace into the nave where saints slap my round bottom

with crops and floggers. I have no restraint. When the devil comes

to challenge me to turn stone into bread I turn that stone into a ball gag

and that ball gag into beautiful green slime. Then I speak: ecto-goo dripping;

a Latin chant which fills up each aisle with cuneiform and sacred urges.

I would go eyeless, deaf, nose-shot—tonguechopped—before I gave up touch. My one

desire is to be disobedient and ruin everything with my cold, degrading hands.

So I degrade. I invoke catholic magic and cross the threshold of bondage

into tactile darkness. Haunted miracles: there are dead healers

in the narthex named Narthex that I inhale into my incense

mouth like an obliterating bloodrelic. This is my blow brand, my lamb of oxygen.

If I have powers: let them be idolatry. If I have a halo then let that halo

blind my enemies like unchippable black nail polish. I don't want sanctification

that's a long word to say and I don't want it. I desire a higher life. Not

the highest life. Just one with an occasional mimosa, a tiny slice of cake, and enough red

confetti sucked into my lungs that every exhale after will be called offering.

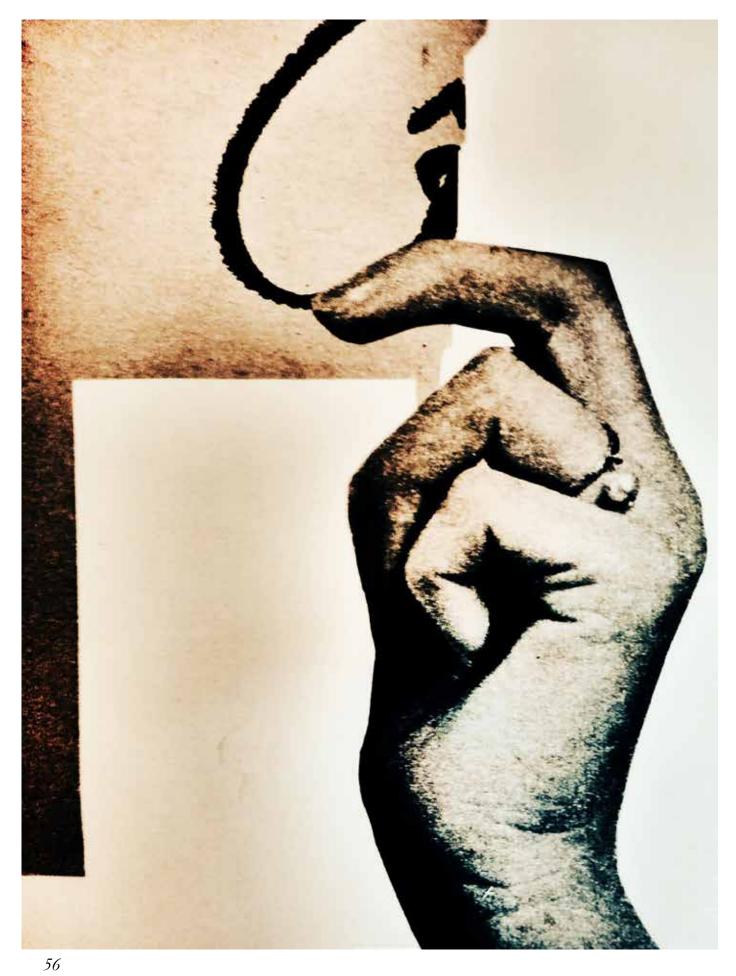


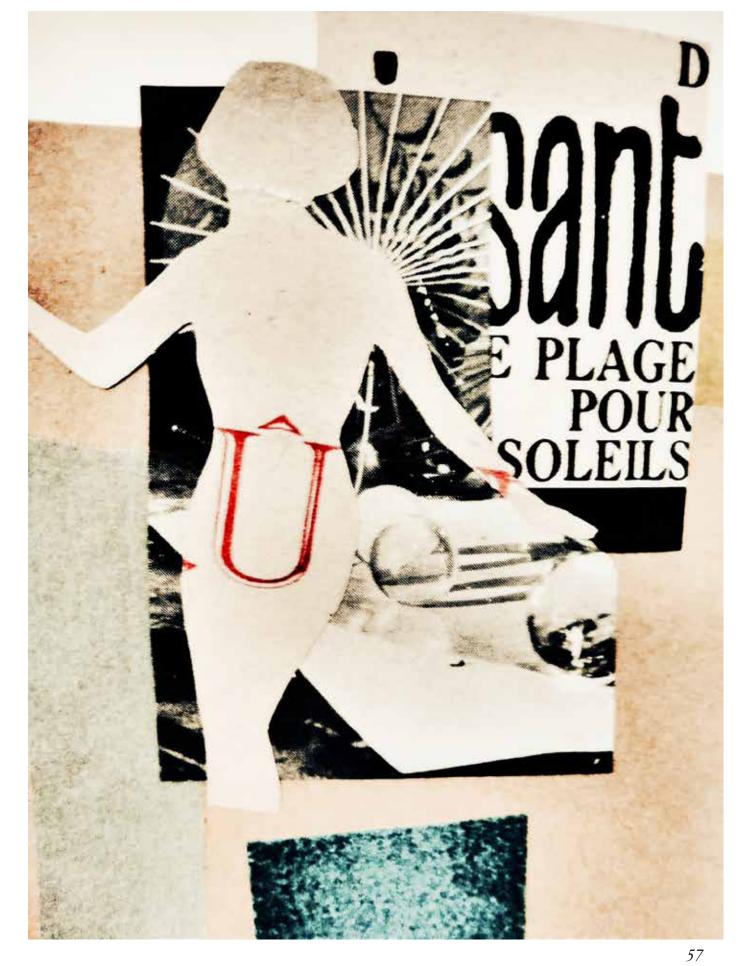
Xanthe Miller, Blue Wave

# 5 POEMS FROM "POST-IT" HIROMI SUZUKI









heta



BIQZ

Angelica Esquivel is a full-time student at the University of Michigan and part-time preschool teacher and embroidery artist. Her fiction and other writings have been published in *Fortnight Literary Press*, *Haunted Waters Press*, *What the F Magazine* and *Cafe Shapiro* anthologies.

**Mark Powell** is the author of five novels, most recently *Small Treasons* from Gallery/Simon and Schuster. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Breadloaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences. In 2014 he was a Fulbright Fellow to Slovakia. He lives in the mountains of North Carolina and teaches at Appalachian State University.

**Danae Barnes** currently lives in Phoenix, Arizona where she explores the many ways to agitate realities. One of these ways involves teaching yoga, the other is playing with words. Specific to words, Danae has a MA in English, (with an emphasis on rhetoric), is a member of the Bay-area based writer's group Finishing School and is an associate editor of *Four Chambers Press*.

Chantel Acevedo was born in Miami to Cuban parents. She is the author of *A Falling Star* (Carolina Wren Press, 2014), *Love and Ghost Letters* (St. Martins, 2006), winner of the Latino International Book Award, and *The Distant Marvels* (Europa, 2015), a finalist for the 2016 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. Acevedo is an Associate Professor of English in the MFA Program at the University of Miami.

**Audrey Wick** is a full-time professor of English at Blinn College in Texas. In addition to her teaching duties, she has published in such magazines as *Texas*, *Texas Town & City*, *Mature Years*, and *The Daily Yonder* site. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram @WickWrites.

**Nate Maxson** is a writer and performance artist. The author of several collections of poetry, he lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Luke Hankins is the author of a collection of poems, Weak Devotions, and the editor of Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets (both from Wipf & Stock). His latest book, The Work of Creation: Selected Prose, was released by Wipf & Stock in 2016. A collection of his translations of Stella Vinitchi Radulescu's work, A Cry in the Snow & Other Poems, is forthcoming from Seagull Books. His translations have appeared in Blue Lyra Review, The Chattahoochee Review, Connotation Press, Levure Littéraire, New England Review, Pleiades, the Verse Magazine website, and Waxwing, among other places.

**Joshus Lipson** is a student of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and of the mind. He is currently on the road in Portugal, by way of New Jersey, Cambridge, Jerusalem, Istanbul, and San Francisco. He draws his inspiration from Whitman, Eliot, Ginsberg, and the Semitic epics.

**JD Scott** is a writer from Tampa, Florida, and the author of two chapbooks. Recent and forthcoming publications include *Best American Experimental Writing, Denver Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, Salt Hill, Sonora Review, The Pinch, Ninth Letter, Tampa Review, The Atlas Review, RHINO, Apogee, Winter Tangerine, and elsewhere. Recent accolades include attending the Poetry Foundation's* 

inaugural Poetry Incubator and being awarded residencies at both the Millay Colony and Writers at the Eyrie.

Hiromi Suzuki is an illustrator, poet, and artist living in Tokyo, Japan. She is a contributor to the Japanese poetry magazine "gui" (run by members of the Japanese "VOU" group of poets, founded by the late Kitasono Katue) and the author of *Ms. Cried, 77 poems by hiromi suzuki* (kisaragi publishing). Her works are published in *Otoliths, BlazeVOX, Empty Mirror, Experiment-O, M58, DATABLEED, Black Market Re-View, 3:AM Magazine* and elsewhere.

**Anna Martin** is a digital/traditional artist, writer and photographer based out of Salt Lake City, Utah. She is an avid explorer and much of her artwork is inspired by her travels and life experiences, and she strives to capture emotions and inspire others with her work. Her work has been previously exhibited in various galleries and museums, such as the Rosenberg Gallery, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, NY.

**Xanthe Miller** grew up in the border mining town of Bisbee, Arizona. She attended Macalester College in Minnesota and Pacific Northwest College of Art in Oregon. She returned to the Southwest to pursue art and has exhibited work throughout the borderland.

**Gina Tyquiengco** is an artist and designer. She illustrated the coloring book, *Notes from the Universe*. Her artwork has been exhibited at Artlando and CityArts Factory and is on display in local businesses and private collections. You can view her website at ginadoesdesign.com and follow her on Instagram @ginadoesdesign.

Garth Simmons was born in 1981 in Doncaster in the United Kingdom. He has been influenced very much by post-industrial landscapes, wastelands and ruins both external and internal (psychological). After graduating from high school Garth went to Doncaster Art College and mixed his fascinations with the methods of abstract art. Following this he went to the University of Hull. After graduation from the University of Hull, Garth moved to Manchester in 2005 to seek his fortune as a full-time artist. It was here that he discovered his own form of collage which involved scanning, printing and cutting up his drawings and paintings to create new textures.

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-The Editors



'TIL NEXT TIME.